

## ARTS EDUCATION

## Learning is instrumental: Arts flourish in Flathead

By Molly Priddy  
Reprinted with permission  
from the *Flathead Beacon*, May 6

It's not yet 8 a.m. at the high school. The main office is still shuttered, and even the coffee shop is gated. Teenagers, in their historic late-rising glory, shouldn't be happily awake, but in the music rooms at the school, they're thriving.

In close proximity, three different jazz ensembles are hard at work in their final rehearsals before heading to the Montana High School Association State Solo and Ensemble Festivals in Missoula (the festival took place May 1 and 2).

One jazz group works on a traditional tune while in the next room, they're grooving to some Grateful Dead. Nearby, the experienced Voce choir – a select group of music students made up of juniors and seniors – is running through the songs it will sing for the judges.

Music teacher Mark McCrady floats among the groups, offering tweaks and encouragement, but mostly leaving them to monitor themselves. It's stunning how much good music these kids can play so early in the morning.

"Not a bad way to start the day," McCrady said.

Before 9 a.m., the 19 orchestra students who are also headed to the festival settled in for their final rehearsals.

All told, Whitefish High School was preparing to send about 60 students to the state finals, having earned "superior" ratings at the district music festival two weeks prior.

"That's one out of every eight kids walking through the hallways at Whitefish High School," Principal Kerry Drown said. "That's pretty impressive."

### The musical connection

Most humans feel a connection to music in some way; turn on a toe-tapping tune in a crowded room and watch to see how many people start moving with the beat, consciously or not.

Music is the language of choice for some, a sanctuary for others; it's human emotion translated without words, an outlet for the creativity brewing in our heads. Most humans feel a connection to music in some way; turn on a toe-tapping tune in a crowded room and watch to see how many people start moving with the beat, consciously or not.

It's also important for brain development and maintenance, according to the *Journal of Neuroscience*. In 2013, the journal published a study showing that older adults who took music lessons as children had faster brain responses to speech sounds than those who didn't take childhood lessons. This held true even for those adults who hadn't actively played an instrument in decades.

Other studies have shown music education helps enhance a student's overall ability in other scholastic arenas, such as math and language development.

Relying on music to help develop students' overall abilities is part of the scholastic foundation in the Whitefish School District, Drown said.

"In Whitefish, particularly, it is an integral part of what we believe in developing well-rounded young people," he said. "This community, it definitely embraces and expects art in our education to be a big part of the thread that winds throughout the schools."

### Investing in the arts

However, music and arts education are historically the first on the chopping block when school budgets are trimmed, before such subjects as math or science or reading, which are typically deemed more important.

After the recent recession, schools across the United States slashed their budgets. Art and music took the brunt of the cuts in many places; in 2013, Philadelphia's public schools partially dealt with a \$304 million shortfall by completely shutting down arts and music program funding. That same year in Chicago, the public schools laid off more than 1,700 teachers, with 10 percent of them having taught art or music.

Earlier this year in Billings, a leaked letter with the proposal to cut band and orchestra from fifth grade as a way to handle budget shortfalls for School District 2 raised considerable ire from parents and music supporters. The school district superintendent said the

"We did great," he said of the Stillwater participants. "Four of our five groups got Division One ratings, which is the best."

Still, the school is tight on money, especially for the music department, he said. There is some money available year to year, but the rest of it is raised through events, he said. The school's annual Evening for the Arts fundraiser brought in more money this year than it had in several previous years, Hunter said, though he said he couldn't be specific about the total.

"I'm stoked, because it's like three times what we've been making the last few years," he said. "(Music and arts education) is very important to the families we serve."

### Exercising both sides of the brain

At Whitefish, the emphasis on the arts has expanded into the Center for Applied Media, Arts and Sciences (CAMAS), which began when the district built the new section of the high school.

"The idea is to work out the right and left sides of the brain," Drown, the principal, said. "Students who may excel in one area of school should also flex the other muscles of their brains in music or art," Drown said.

Music is also a way to introduce students to one another, potentially expanding their social circles. Jenanne Solberg, who teaches the orchestra

class and started the program in 2003 with a loan from Whitefish Credit Union for 30 violins, said the students come from various backgrounds and have myriad talents, often switching between music classes with ease.

"If you work with that, then it tends to generate its own energy," Solberg said.

Her orchestra program now holds 42 students, some of whom play with the Glacier Symphony and Chorale. It starts in fifth grade; all fifth-graders are required to play the violin. They may find they enjoy it, she said, but it's also a chance to teach them they can try and fail at something, and that's OK.

"It teaches them it's OK to try something new, for the heck of it," she said.

Last Thursday, senior student Jordan Reese embodied the picture of jazzy relaxation, sipping tea between songs and snapping his fingers and dancing along when he's not playing his clarinet. After playing with the jazz ensemble, he joined with the Voce choir, led by veteran teacher Kevin Allen-Schmid.

During the state music fest, Reese entered five competitions: jazz ensemble, vocal quartet, clarinet quartet, percussion, and the choir. The Voce choir earned a superior rating during the state festival, as did Reese's jazz ensemble, his clarinet quartet, and his percussion ensemble.

Whitefish High students also earned "superior" and "excellent" ratings in piano solos, vocal solos, vocal ensembles, band solos, band ensembles, orchestra solos, and orchestra ensembles.

At dress rehearsal last week, Reese was loose and laughing, while also acting as a leader. He's the president of Voce, and said he has enjoyed watching all the music programs grow during his time at Whitefish High.

"That's really cool for me to see, being a senior this year," Reese said.

Fellow senior Shandra Bell said singing with Voce is a highlight of her week, a time to spend with people who share her passion for singing.

"It's more relaxing every time I come here," she said.

Jared Dyck, another senior in the group, didn't have time in his schedule for music classes this year, but wanted to be part of the choir, even if it meant waking up early three times a week for rehearsal.

"It allows me to be part of music," he said. "And I missed music."



Tommy Sausen, left, and Johnny Perez Jr. grasp arms as the Voce choir rehearses at Whitefish High School on April 30, 2015.

(Photo by Greg Lindstrom, *Flathead Beacon*)

letter was unauthorized and untrue.

In the Flathead Valley, however, schools are trying to place more emphasis on the arts. Last year, Glacier High School started the new Fine Arts Academy, which allows students to place a four-year emphasis on music, theater, or visual arts.

At Flathead High School, fine arts are part of the wildly successful International Baccalaureate Programme; all IB students must take arts classes as part of the program, and students with an emphasis on the arts host public exhibits to showcase their artistic growth and maturity.

"The great thing about Kalispell public schools is the rich opportunities that our kids have in the area of fine arts," School District 5 Superintendent Mark Flatau said. "And it is deeply embraced, and I appreciate that."

Flatau, in his first year as superintendent of Kalispell Public Schools, said he has seen fine art education become more prominent, even where budgets are concerned.

In his former job as a superintendent in Washington, Flatau said the 2008, 2009 and 2010 budget years called for major cuts, but music and arts were kept whole. In Kalispell, the budgeting process can be painful when cuts in some places are necessary to support programs in other areas, Flatau said, but it's the district's goal to squeeze dollars from programs wherein the fewest students are affected.

"But the bottom line is there hasn't been one discussion on (cutting) fine arts or music," Flatau said. "This district provides more opportunities in those areas for our kids than any other district I've worked in, and we can be proud of that."

At Stillwater Christian School, the K-12 music program is blossoming, according to Micah Hunter, the director of choirs.

"Our numbers are really, really good," Hunter said. "In the middle school, on the choir side, we've got about 35 out of 50 or 60 total students."

Among the high school students, numbering about 110, about 90 kids participate in either band or choir or both, Hunter said. Stillwater also hosted its annual music festival in April, inviting other Christian schools and homeschool students to participate.

There were seven schools present with about 280 kids, Hunter said.



6

### Artists in Schools, Communities awards

#### 23 grants

The Montana Arts Council recently awarded \$110,700 in Artists in Schools and Communities grants for arts learning programs to 23 schools and organizations. The AISC program is no longer taking applications for the FY16 fiscal year due to lack of funding.

The Artists in Schools and Communities program provides matching funds that support a wide range of arts learning experiences and artist residencies for participants of all ages with professional working artists, as well as other special projects that support arts learning in schools and community settings.

The program will reopen early in January 2016 and begin taking applications for projects in the 2017 fiscal year, which begins July 1, 2016.

To discuss an idea for a potential arts learning project for your school or community, contact Emily Kohring, director of Arts Education, at 406-444-6522 or ekohring@mt.gov.